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Louis-Ferdinand Céline, literary genius or national pariah?: defining moral parameters for influential cultural figures, post- *Charlie Hebdo*

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Abstract

In January 2011 the French Minister of Culture, Frédéric Mitterrand, withdrew Louis-Ferdinand Céline from a list of famous French authors specifically selected for a national celebration of culture. This bold decision polarized opinion: while many welcomed Mitterrand's intervention, a number of prominent writers, some of them Jewish, opposed it on the grounds that Céline's abhorrent political beliefs – expressed in three anti-Semitic pamphlets and his flirtation with Nazism- should in no way detract from his literary genius. In the light of this controversy, and of the rise in anti-Semitism following the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks of January 2015, this paper proposes Céline as a vital case study of the moral parameters a democratic nation should apply to a culturally important figure whose political views are deemed unacceptably reactionary.

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Keywords

Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Charlie Hebdo*, Frédéric Mitterrand, cultural history, anti-Semitism, *épuration*, engagement, religion, race

In January 2011, under pressure from prominent Jewish leader Serge Klarsfeld, the then French Minister of Culture, Frédéric Mitterrand, withdrew Louis-Ferdinand Céline from a list of famous French authors specifically selected for a national celebration of culture.¹ However, Céline is widely regarded as France's second most important twentieth-century novelist after Marcel Proust. Mitterrand's bold decision polarized opinion: while many welcomed his intervention, a number of prominent French writers, some of them Jewish, opposed it on the grounds that Céline's abhorrent political beliefs – expressed in three anti-Semitic pamphlets published in the late 1930s and early 1940s and his flirtation with Nazism – should in no way detract from his literary genius. In the light of this controversy, and of the crisis surrounding freedom of speech following the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, this article proposes Céline as an illuminating case study of the moral parameters a democratic nation should apply to a culturally important figure whose political views are deemed unacceptably reactionary. It explores the diverse spectrum of opinions on Céline to bring into sharper focus a central question to have emerged from the *Charlie*

Hebdo crisis: whether or not freedom of speech has its limits, and if so, on what types of speech should those limits be imposed?

In order to answer this question, I suggest, we need to be conscious of two crucial factors: first, the changing nature of, and attitudes towards anti-Semitism in France between the 1930s and the present day; secondly, shifting notions over the same period of the function of literature and the moral responsibility of the writer, in both republican France and a transnational context. These two considerations frame my chronological analysis of four key periods and episodes that shed invaluable light on our perceptions of Céline both as novelist and pamphleteer: first, the surprisingly favourable or neutral reaction to his 1937 pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un massacre* at the time of its publication; secondly, Céline's swift fall from grace and protracted trial and sentence in absentia between 1944–51 in the context of the *épuration*, the purging of French writers accused of collaborating with the German enemy; thirdly, the partial rehabilitation of Céline that began in the 1950s, predominantly, though not exclusively, by fellow writers from the United States rather than France. Finally, I will give a brief overview of contemporary reactions to Frédéric Mitterrand's intervention and the parallels that can be drawn with the *Charlie Hebdo* affair.

1930s: complacency and anti-Semitism

It is perhaps surprising to learn from a twenty-first century perspective, that at the time of its initial publication in 1937 Céline's *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, despite its undeniably virulent anti-Semitic content, became a bestseller that also garnered a significant degree of critical praise. André Derval has usefully concluded from a survey of some sixty journal reviews from across the political spectrum that only less than half openly condemned the pamphlet for its anti-Semitism, while well over half

either endorsed it, or played down its importance. How do we explain the fact that, by today's standards, the reaction was relatively benign, with the exception of a few articles published by Jewish groups and one full-length study (Hans Eric Kaminski's *Céline en chemise brune*, which directly accused his pamphlet of inciting a pogrom against the Jews) (Derval, 2010)? The first reason is simple: despite the relative failure of his second, 1936 novel *Mort à crédit*, Céline's stock in the literary world was still high following the huge critical and commercial success of his debut 1932 novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, still regarded today as a groundbreaking work: a stylistically bold and innovative satire of war and authority. The second reason lies in France's complacent, even tolerant attitude towards anti-Semitism at that time, an attitude that was triggered in no small measure by the wave of Jewish immigration from 1933. Drawing attention to the typical emergence of xenophobia that scapegoats the newly arrived foreigner who is perceived as a threat to the indigenous population, French philosopher Alain Badiou has recently argued that this influx of Jewish immigrants was the 1930s equivalent of the present day disenfranchised, working class French Arabs of the Parisian banlieues. Excluded from, and stigmatized by, mainstream Republican society, and regularly targeted by the police, their circumstances are in many ways comparable to those of the Kouachi brothers – the young men who regrettably committed the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. A striking example of this parallel between 1930s anti-Semitism and present-day Islamophobia is to be found in the unprovoked police raids of 1934 and 1938 that took place in Paris's Jewish quarters, resulting in the random arrest, beating and insulting of Jews on the pretext of not having papers. Anticipating the present-day anti-immigration rhetoric of the Front National, 1935 also saw high-profile strikes by non-Jewish French doctors and lawyers in protest at the influx of Jewish medical practitioners into both the

public and private health systems. That a law was swiftly passed to make it more difficult for immigrant doctors to practice or dispense medicine is a clear indication that anti-Semitism was not only socially widespread, but also institutionally entrenched in a way that it had not been since the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s (Badiou and Hazan, 2011). A third explanation for the generally positive reception of Céline's pamphlet is literary rather than socio-political: namely, that literature at the time was overwhelmingly perceived to be an autonomous practice that was completely separate from morality and politics. Sociologist Gisèle Sapiro calls this an 'art for art's sake' approach to literature that was primarily manifested in the two dominant inter-war literary movements: the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, spear-headed by André Gide, and Surrealism, led by André Breton (Sapiro, 2011). Both championed, albeit in different ways, the idea of the disinterested writer who is not held morally accountable by the State for what he or she writes. Taking aim at the prevailing Catholic morality of the time, Gide satirizes this disinterested role via one of his fictional characters Julius Baraglioul, the intellectual esthete in *Les Caves du Vatican* who commits a gratuitous murder on a train, for which he is not caught. As for Breton, he defended his fellow surrealist poet Louis Aragon, who was threatened with State prosecution for a line in his 1932 poem *Front rouge* which reads, 'Feu sur Léon Blum' ('Shoot Léon Blum'), the then Prime Minister of France. Breton organized a petition denying the legal responsibility of the writer for his writing, citing that since Surrealist poetry emerges from the unconscious it does not involve the responsibility of the writer: 'Nous nous élevons contre toute tentative d'interprétation d'un texte poétique à des fins judiciaires' (Sapiro, 2011: 515). Both the autonomy of literature, and the moral immunity of the writer are unequivocally championed.

This notion of literature as an autonomous practice, thriving against a backdrop of anti-Semitism, provides a context for Gide's favourable reaction to Céline's pamphlet in April 1938. Gide himself was no anti-Semite, nor did he belong to the far-right, but he dismisses Céline's anti-Semitic attacks – for instance his blaming of the Jews for the poor sale of his second novel *Mort à crédit* – as a deliberate joke on the reader. Instead, he claims, we should praise *Bagatelles* for its bold stylistic experimentation and creativity, the same qualities that are to be found in certain visceral descriptive passages from his novel:

Quand Céline vient parler d'une conspiration du silence, d'une coalition pour empêcher la vente de ses livres, il est bien évident qu'il veut rire. Et quand il fait le juif responsable de la mévente, il va de soi que c'est une plaisanterie. Et si ce n'était pas une plaisanterie, alors il serait, lui, Céline, complètement maboul [...]. Il fait de son mieux pour qu'on ne le prenne pas au sérieux [...]. C'est un créateur. Il parle des juifs dans *Bagatelles* tout comme il parlait, dans *Mort à Crédit*, des asticots que sa force évocatrice venait de créer. (Derval, 2010: 256–7)

It is worth contrasting Gide's primarily literary response with that of the far-right publication, *Gringoire* in March 1938. Where Gide praises Céline the novelist and stylistic innovator but minimizes the anti-Semitic pamphleteer, Jean-Pierre Maxence, on the contrary, flags up his anti-Semitism as evidence of his talents as pamphleteer rather than novelist.

Avant tout, il est un pamphlétaire. Cela se voyait dans les meilleures pages du *Voyage* [...], dans les meilleures pages de *Mort à Crédit* [...] On lui demande un don, et un seul : savoir trouver la faille profonde de celui qu'il attaque, ne pas s'arrêter au

ridicule, aux insignifiances; du premier coup atteindre à l'essentiel, au Cœur, à l'hypocrisie du problème [...] Ses 'attaques' sont admirables. (Derval, 2010: 234–5)

That Céline is praised here for effectively attacking his target, denouncing hypocrisy in the best traditions of the French pamphlet, points to a second generic preconception at that time: namely, that the pamphlet, as opposed to the novel, was a genre highly valued, by both the right and left, as a type of polemical writing that exposed the hypocrisy of State authority (Zola's *J'accuse* of 1898, is the model pamphlet in this regard). According to critic Marc Angenot, the pamphlet is typically written by a solitary individual who demonstrates intellectual courage by speaking out against a scandal, who posits a truth in order to expose an institutionalized lie. Contrary to established writers, whose language is authorized by institutions such as the Académie Française, the pamphleteer's legitimacy lies in his autonomy and the risk he takes in combating the dominant ideology. His break with conventional discourse and language is the mark of his anti-conformism and assigns to his words a subversive potential (Angenot, 1982). It is precisely Céline's anti-conformism, the cathartic purity of the language of his pamphlet that in January 1938 is contrasted favourably with the vulgarity of his literature by Jules Rivet in *Le Canard Enchaîné*, France's most established satirical journal, and which today remains a left-leaning rival to *Charlie Hebdo*:

Je n'ai pas aimé beaucoup *Mort à credit* [...]. Tout était pourri, bourbeux, verdâtre et nauséabond... Dans *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, rien de sale, rien qui ne soit, au contraire, très sain et aéré. Voici de la belle haine bien nette, bien propre, de la bonne violence à manche relevées, à bras raccourcis, du pave levé à pleins biceps! [...] Ici le non-conformiste se débat avec vigueur, le solitaire s'affirme, montre les crocs, règle

des comptes [...] Je ne voudrais pas banaliser ce livre libérateur, torrentiel et irresistible du mot de chef-d'œuvre. C'est beaucoup plus grand que cela, et plus pur. (Derval, 2010: 63–4)

1940s: backlash and *épuration*

By 1944, the socio-political and intellectual landscape had changed dramatically from that of the late 1930s. Céline's reputation, both literary and political, was now in serious trouble. France had suffered four years of Occupation, Nazi Germany was staring defeat in the face and the Communist-led French resistance movement was intent on using its newly acquired political strength to flush out all suspected collaborators. Céline swiftly became part of a blacklisted group of writers accused of collaborating with the enemy, who were to be tried under the legal authority of the CNE ('Comité national des écrivains'). The late 1930s minimization or tolerance of his anti-Semitism, and the generally positive evaluation of his pamphlets either on literary grounds or as part of a noble anti-conformist tradition, was gradually replaced from late 1942 by a series of articles and denunciations on BBC radio of his activities with the Nazi enemy. Céline, contrary to fellow French writer and Nazi sympathiser Robert Brasillach, did not actively collaborate in disseminating Nazi propaganda via radio or journalism and was in any case regarded with some suspicion as too rebellious and unpredictable by prominent Nazis such as the Minister of Culture Otto Abetz. But by 1944 he was receiving death threats in his flat in Montmartre, not entirely dissimilar to those received by the cartoonist Charb shortly before his death. Except that contrary to Charb, Céline saw the writing on the wall and fled to Sigmaringen in Germany in June 1944, where Pétain and the Vichy regime were now based. He was then offered sanctuary in Denmark, but under pressure from the French, subsequently imprisoned and tried in absentia.

Céline's protracted trial and his swift fall from grace need to be understood in the context of the collective desire for vengeance against perceived collaborators, and a so-called 'cultural trauma' that drastically modified the intellectual landscape of the mid 1940s from that of the Gidean and Surrealist notion of 'art for art's sake' to the Sartrean imperative of literature as a form of politicised moral engagement. Sociologists such as Patrick Baert (2015) and Gisèle Sapiro (2011) have convincingly argued that the traumas of the Occupation meant that the 1930s notions of writing as mere opinion and the author as a disinterested figure who operated above the fray were no longer tenable. The war had offered tangible proof to the contrary: Henri Vercors's resistance work *Le Silence de la mer*, to take one notable example, was successfully dropped over occupied France to raise the morale of the Resistance and lower that of the Nazis (Baert, 2015). Words were thus no longer the mere expression of the writer's subjectivity, but weapons with a political impact on society, a notion that was powerfully advocated by Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (1948) and his existentialist philosophy. So great was the burden of moral responsibility now placed on the writer that he or she was held up to a higher standard of behaviour than other professions who had collaborated, such as politicians or industrialists and even publishers. In the case of publishers, a certain amount of hypocrisy and self-interest was at play. Even staunch anti-collaborationists such as Sartre, who, to use today's parlance sought to 'weaponize' the written word, were quite prepared to defend the powerful publisher Gaston Gallimard to secure his own publishing outlets, knowing full well that during the war Gallimard had published collaborationist as well as resistance texts.

Here, a pertinent parallel can be drawn between Sartre's questionable moral position and the similarly inconsistent stance more recently adopted by *Charlie*

Hebdo. Even though both the existentialist philosopher and the satirical journal have, in the main, rightly been recognized as staunch defenders of free speech and individual freedom more generally (albeit from completely different perspectives and via different media), neither can consider themselves entirely exempt from accusations of personal or political expediency and double standards when it comes to certain decisions they have made about what should and should not be published. So far as *Charlie Hebdo* is concerned, question-marks still surround its handling of the so-called ‘affaire Siné’ of July 2008. That summer, Siné, one of *Charlie*’s most respected and established cartoonists, was accused of anti-Semitism for publishing a cartoon satirizing President Sarkozy’s son’s marriage to a wealthy and prominent Jewish heiress.² Despite Siné’s vehement rebuttal of this accusation, *Charlie*’s editor Philippe Val sacked him, after he refused to apologize for the offending cartoon. Siné was subsequently taken to court by the Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l’Antisémitisme (LICRA), an organization which works to promote racial tolerance. In December 2010, he won a €40,000 court judgment against his former publisher for wrongful termination. Whether or not one agrees with this legal judgment against Philippe Val and in favour of Siné, a judgment that also raises the thorny question of different standards being applied to the satirical depiction of Jews as opposed to Muslims, what is clear in this instance is that *Charlie*’s customary defence of its journalists’ unequivocal right to free speech was less robust and uncompromising than it might have been, especially when compared to its understandably more defiant stance and initial show of solidarity in the months following the January 2015 attacks. Irrespective of historical period or political climate, it seems, establishing and adhering to consistent moral parameters for the freedom of expression is a difficult

goal to achieve, even among those, such as the *Charlie* journalists and editor, who purport to be on the same ‘team’ and thus are meant to share the same values.

If we return to the highly charged political climate of post-war France, we find that justice and morality were highly selective in another sense. The anti-Semitism of writers such as Céline was judged not as a crime against humanity, in line with the 1944 Nuremberg Laws that emerged from the Nazi genocide trials, but according to articles 75 and 83 of the code penal as treason, ‘intelligence avec l’ennemi,’ and a threat to national dignity, ‘actes d’état à nuire à la défense nationale’ (Richard, 2010: 9–10). Patriotic duty, in other words, took precedence over universal human rights. The motivation for this was not only an anti-German nationalist desire for vengeance, but also a reluctance to confront the true extent of French collaboration in the Holocaust. It is no coincidence that in his 1946 work *Réflexions sur la question juive*, in which he accuses Céline of being paid by the Nazis (an accusation for which Céline was eventually acquitted through inspection of his bank accounts), Sartre glosses over the Holocaust and the French deportation of Jews. He toed the resistance line: collaborators were in the minority and most French people were patriots and good Republicans. Plus Sartre himself, as Baert suggests, felt guilty at not intervening in the deportation of Jews (2015).

The moral double standards surrounding the ‘purging’ of collaborationist writers were not lost on Céline, who sought to exploit them to his advantage. As Bourdieusian sociologist Anna Boschetti has convincingly argued, he had always considered himself an outsider from the literary establishment, someone who did not belong to the cultured elite represented by the Surrealists and who came to literature late after first practicing as a doctor. This feeling of exclusion was undoubtedly exacerbated by the ‘scandal’ surrounding the 1932 Prix Goncourt, which was awarded

not to *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, but Guy Mazeline's now forgotten novel *Les Loups*. Céline first submitted the manuscript of his novel to the powerful publisher Gallimard, whose 'comité de lecture' spent an entire week deliberating before finally accepting the manuscript, subject to changes. Céline refused, preferring instead to publish with the lesser known, but fast emerging Robert Denoël, who was « fou d'enthousiasme » about his novel, requesting no changes whatsoever. At this stage, the Goncourt committee, having originally considered *Voyage au bout de la nuit* as the front-runner for the prize, instead switched its allegiance to Mazeline's novel, which so happened to be published by Gallimard. Céline had to be satisfied with the Prix Renaudot, which caused an outcry: two journalists took two members of the Goncourt committee to court, accusing them of selling their votes to Gallimard (Boschetti: 1986, 512). So was Céline genuinely 'robbed' of the Goncourt prize? It is just as plausible, as Boschetti pertinently reminds us (Boschetti: 1986, 521), that he was simply ahead of his time: the victim not of blatant favoritism, but the cautious conservatism of the Goncourt committee and the reputable publisher Gallimard. By comparison, Robert Denoël, an ambitious young Belgian publisher seeking to make a name for himself, had absolutely nothing to lose in backing such a stylistically daring, modern and anti-conformist author. But none of this mattered to Céline. The Goncourt incident, in his eyes, was further proof that his hostility towards the literary establishment, not to mention his anti-Semitism (one of the Goncourt committee members, Benjamin Crémieux, was Jewish), were entirely justified. Consequently, by the time of the *épuration*, his standard response to the accusations leveled against him was twofold: to defend his anti-Semitism as patriotic and pacifist, and to adopt the stance of the persecuted victim (Boschetti, 1986). In a letter to the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Jean Paulhan, in April 1948 he defends his attacks on

Jews, whom he associated with a belligerent hatred of Germany, as a purely preventative act to avoid another war. Contrary to Sartre, he does not shy away from mentioning the Holocaust, vehemently denying any support for the genocide, or any causal relation between his pamphlets and the death camps:

Lorsque j'attaquais les Juifs, lorsque j'écrivais *Bagatelles pour un massacre* je ne voulais pas dire ou recommander qu'on massacre les Juifs. Eh foutre tout le contraire! Je demandais aux Juifs à ce qu'ils ne nous lancent pas par hystérie dans un autre massacre plus désastreux que celui de 14–18! C'est bien différent. On joue avec grande canaillerie sur le sens de mes pamphlets. On s'acharne à vouloir me considérer comme un massacreur de Juifs. Je suis un préservateur patriote acharné de français et d'aryens – et en même temps d'ailleurs de Juifs! Je n'ai pas voulu Auschwitz, Buchenwald. (Céline, 2009: 1038)

In letter of 20 October 1949 written to his Chief Prosecutor, the Commissaire Jean Seltensperger, not only does he throw patriotism – the moral quality most valued by his accusers – back in their faces, but he does so in a way that presents him as a courageous, anti-conformist literary martyr who belongs to a long line of unjustly persecuted writers, and whose contribution to the French language has been misunderstood and unrecognized:

Si l'on me condamne finalement à la saisie de tous mes biens, ce sera gai... On me saisira mes livres qui ont renouvelé le style français, appris aux Français ce qu'ils pouvaient transposer de leur langage parlé en écrit... Ce n'est pas si mal... Ça ne se fait pas tout seul une petite innovation en français... On entre a beaucoup moins à l'Académie française... Je suis de la vieille tradition des écrivains français à travers

l'Histoire, je dis des véritables écrivains, toujours irrévocablement traqués et si possible pendus, jamais conformistes... (Céline, 2009: 1237)

In the end, however, as David Alliot points out, it was a combination of luck and a shrewd legal team, rather than Céline's self-portrayal as patriotic literary martyr that resulted in his relatively lenient sentence. In 1950 he was convicted in France to one year's imprisonment for the crime of national indignity, together with a heavy fine and the confiscation of half his assets, only to be granted amnesty one year later. Furious with his original verdict Céline replaced his first lawyer Albert Naud (a former member of the Resistance), by Jean-Louis Tixier Vignancour, a former collaborator, who adopted a shrewder, more pragmatic defence strategy that hinged on completely disassociating Céline the man from his writing. He exploited a legal loophole by presenting his client by his real, legal name Louis Destouches without specifying that it was one and the same person as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, his pen-name, by which he was more commonly known. Vignancour made sure Céline was discreetly domiciled in Paris, and that the 'dossier Destouches' was conveniently 'buried' amongst a host of others. The irony was that everyone – with the exception of the judge – knew full well who Louis Destouches really was (Vebret, 2011). Céline's lawyer had the prescience to recognize that in the politically charged climate of the time, the notorious reputation that preceded him as an influential writer-collaborator was likely to damage his chances of a fair trial.

1950s: condemnation in France, rehabilitation in the United States

And yet despite his amnesty, Céline returned to France in 1951 a broken man, his reputation in his homeland in tatters, and retreated to a hermetic existence in Meudon

outside Paris where he kept a low profile, granting only rare interviews. Few French writers or critics were brave enough to defend him. One exception was Dominique de Roux, the founder of *Les Cahiers de l'Herne* in 1961, a publication devoted to controversial writers; another was Philippe Sollers of the *Tel Quel* group who continues to champion Céline as a literary genius to this day. But as American critic Alice Kaplan has argued in her penetrating 1996 article *The Céline effect*, paradoxically, the very opposite happened in the United States. This was the only country that organized a petition in favour of Céline in 1946, when he was threatened with extradition from Denmark to France. If Céline's reputation in France in the early 1950s hit an all-time low, then conversely, it grew dramatically across the Atlantic. Why was this so? First, because Céline was championed and introduced to American writers such as the Beats by Kenneth Rexroth at the publishing house New Directions, which reprinted translations of *Voyage*, *Mort à credit* and *Guignol's band* in the late 1940s and 1950s. To these writers, Céline represented an exciting new brand of literary rebellion that provided a timely aesthetic alternative to the stifling orthodox formalism of the so-called 'Reactionary Generation' of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Such was the admiration for Céline of the Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, that they set out to meet him at his home in Meudon in 1958. Secondly, by the mid-1960s Céline's black humour and anti-war stance was speaking to another generation of influential American writers, notably Philip Roth and Kurt Vonnegut, who were opposed to the Vietnam War. Both even taught courses on Céline at the Iowa Writer's workshop. Thirdly, Céline is not an American writer, and thus exempt from more local political passions and, fourthly, the anti-Semitic pamphlets are not available in English translation and tend not to cloud his American reception, most American authors being familiar only with his fiction. But even among those few

American-Jewish admirers of Céline to have read his pamphlets, Kaplan argues – Philip Roth being the most famous example – there is a particular American tradition which compels them, whatever their personal circumstances, to separate politics from aesthetic appreciation. This tradition has two sources: one is the libertarian view enshrined in the First Amendment, the second is a New Critical tradition of close reading which separates aesthetic appreciation from politics, envisaging art as formally transcendent and canonical, because disinterested.

2011 and beyond: Mitterrand's intervention

Thus far I have tried to show how Céline's reputation and legacy – which largely rests on our assessment of the relationship between his literature and his politics – has fluctuated significantly according to changing historical, aesthetic and geographical context: in the 'art for art's sake', anti-Semitic France of the 1930s the politics were minimized in favour of the writing; in the anti-collaborationist 1940s, when Sartre's notion of 'engagé' literature came to the fore, this situation was reversed; from the 1950s, Céline the literary writer, rather than the anti-Semite pamphleteer was rehabilitated, but predominantly outside France where his anti-conformism could be praised outside the strictures of nationalist French republican ideology. These developments bring us full circle back to Frédéric Mitterrand's intervention. How legitimate was it and where does it leave Céline now, especially in a 'post-Charlie' climate where the very nature of freedom of speech is more at stake than ever before?

Among the principal objections to Mitterrand's intervention have been accusations of draconian censorship, caving in to public opinion, double standards and the ambiguous use of the term 'celebration' as opposed to 'commemoration'. Philippe Sollers, for instance, accuses Frédéric Mitterrand of censorship and

hypocrisy, given that his own uncle François Mitterrand was friends with René Bousquet who collaborated in the deportation of Jews:

Quant au Ministre de la Culture, il est devenu le Ministre de la Censure – je le dis gentiment. Si vous ajoutez le fait qu’il s’appelle Mitterrand, et que François Mitterrand était quand même très lié à René Bousquet et à tout ça... (Vebret, 2011:163–4)

Another form of hypocrisy attacked by the opponents is that of double standards. How can Céline be singled out for exclusion when other notoriously anti-Semitic writers such as Voltaire were included, along with Jean Genet who supposedly slept with German soldiers, and Louis Aragon who supported the Stalinist gulags?

Malheureusement, M. Mitterrand a préféré capituler (en un temps record!) devant une attitude communautariste, aussi estimable soit-elle. Cela veut dire qu’à l’avenir, il ne sera plus possible de célébrer le très anti-Semite et négrier Voltaire (dont le corps est au Panthéon), Jean Genet et ses amitiés avec les soldats allemands, Louis Aragon, barde du stalinisme! [...] J’ai toujours préféré l’explication à l’opprobre. (Vebret, 2011: 39)

A third response focused on the insufficient distinction made between commemoration and celebration, especially in the context of a national French republican ideology keen to preserve its proud revolutionary heritage. Had the anniversary in question been a commemoration rather than a celebration, so the argument goes, then Céline’s name could have been left on the list. The example given is that we can celebrate the French Revolution, but only commemorate

Robespierre and the Terror. In support of this position, historian Jean-Noël Jeanneney wrote in January 2011:

Cela fait plusieurs fois que je dis que ce recueil porte mal son nom. La notion de célébration est ambiguë. Si on parlait de ‘commémoration’ plutôt que de ‘célébration’, il n’y aurait plus d’ambiguïté. Quand j’ai présidé la mission du bicentenaire de la Révolution française, il me semblait légitime de célébrer la Déclaration des droits de l’homme, mais il aurait été absurde de ne pas commémorer la Terreur.³

Now the dilemma surrounding the cultural consecration of a writer as controversial as Céline is highly relevant to the recent controversy generated by the PEN awards for Courage given to the surviving *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists. Deborah Eisenberg’s objection to the award was that it was especially offensive to a religious community – Muslims – that already considers itself to be victimized and disenfranchised. It is a fallacy to assume that the three main monotheistic religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – are equally fair game for satire because ‘certain expressions of anti-Semitism are illegal in France, so Judaism is out of bounds for satire’; and in Christianity visual depictions of the sanctified – such as Jesus and Mary – are encouraged. In Islam, however, a visual portrayal of the Prophet is insulting:

I can hardly be alone in considering *Charlie Hebdo*’s cartoons that satirize Islam to be not merely tasteless and brainless but brainlessly reckless as well. To a Muslim population in France that is already embattled, marginalized, impoverished, and victimized, in large part a devout population that clings to its religion for support,

Charlie Hebdo's cartoons of the Prophet must be seen as intended to cause further humiliation and suffering.⁴

Pen's executive director Susan Nossel responded to Eisenberg by defending the award on two grounds: first, that what *Charlie Hebdo* attacked was not religion itself, but the blurring of the lines between religion and politics, which leads to totalitarianism; secondly, that what the award legitimizes or applauds is not what *Charlie Hebdo* says, but *their right to say it*: nothing enjoys sanctity and everything is a fair object of critique:

The new editor of *Charlie Hebdo* has said that in mocking religion their aim has been not to attack religion itself, but rather the role of religion in politics and the blurring of lines in-between, which they see as promoting totalitarianism [...] In pushing the boundaries of discourse as the best satirists do – American, European, or otherwise – *Charlie Hebdo* broke taboos, raised questions and sparked debates that expanded the space for expression and the exchange of ideas. They paid a heavy price for doing so, and then pressed on despite heartbreak and devastation. We think that shows a powerful commitment to free expression no matter the costs, and it is that commitment that we wish to honor.⁵

In conclusion, perhaps Eisenberg does have a valid point. If we cast our minds back to the late 1930s climate in which Céline's pamphlet was first published, Jews, following Badiou's analogy, were the equivalent of present-day French Muslims: largely working class, persecuted by the authorities and disenfranchised. Just as the *Front National* targets Muslims today, a minority that already considers itself victimized by the French State, the far right of the 1930s, at times with the active

complicity of the police, consistently scapegoated Jews. While it is certainly true that, in the 1930s, radical Jewish groups did not, contrary to the radicalized Muslims of today, blow up newspaper offices or attack civilians in supermarkets, by the same token, Céline's anti-Semitism was expressed in a particularly virulent language that, contrary to *Charlie Hebdo*, satirised the Jewish race *as well as* religion. Bernard-Henri Lévy, in a 2008 article in response to the 'affaire Siné', mentioned above, made an important distinction between satire of religion and satire of race. Since Voltaire, he argues, it has been deemed within the acceptable orbit of French republican values to satirise the former, but not the latter, because satire of race opens the door to dangerous biologicistic theories of racial superiority and oppression:

Bouffer du curé, du rabbin, de l'imam – jamais du 'Juif' ou de l' 'Arabe'. Être solidaire, bien entendu, de caricaturistes qui se moquent du fanatisme et le dénoncent – mais s'interdire, fût-ce au prétexte de la satire, la moindre complaisance avec les âmes glauques qui tripatouillent dans les histoires de sang, d'ADN, de génie des peuples, de race. C'est une ligne de démarcation. Soit, à la lettre, un principe critique. Et c'est là, dans le strict respect de cette ligne, qu'est, au sens propre, la pensée critique.⁶

Of course, Bernard-Henri Lévy's distinction, as Eisenberg has shown us, needs further refining, because some types of satire are clearly more offensive to particular religions (such as Islam) than to others. But his warning is certainly valid when retrospectively applied to Céline. Despite their highly 'racialised' and racist content, criticism of his pamphlets only became widespread once French nationhood was under threat from the Nazis and the full horror of the Holocaust was finally recognized. Few would dispute that, as Nossel suggests, freedom of expression needs

to be defended, including Céline's, and he should rightly be recognized as a truly great novelist. But the case of his pamphlets – pamphlets whose publication in France has, according to Céline's own express wishes, been banned since the early 1950s – is a salutary reminder of the need to denounce *at the time of its publication* (rather than with hindsight) material that specifically targets, and is potentially offensive to, a group that is already in a socially vulnerable position. While nothing can ever possibly justify the cold-blooded killing of journalists, let alone of innocent bystanders, the horrific consequences of complacency towards anti-Semitism in the 1930s should at the very least have taught us that similar tolerance of material that could be considered Islamophobic could once again, in the absence of a robust and unwavering ethical vigilance, pave the way to another more sinister type of stigmatization.

Notes

1. See article in *Le Monde*: http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2011/01/21/frederic-mitterrand-retire-celine-des-celebrations-nationales_1468998_3246.html
2. For a succinct overview of the 'affaire Sine' see:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/4351672/French-cartoonist-Sine-on-trial-on-charges-of-anti-Semitism-over-Sarkozy-jibe.html>
3. See article in *Le Monde*: http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2011/01/22/frederic-mitterrand-fait-volte-face-et-ecarte-celine-des-celebrations-de-2011_1469140_3246.html
4. For the dialogue between Eisenberg and Nossel, see:
<https://theintercept.com/2015/04/27/read-letters-comments-pen-writers-protesting-charlie-hebdo-award/>

5. *Ibid*

6. See article in *Le Monde*: http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2008/07/21/de-quoi-sine-est-il-le-nom-par-bernard-henri-levy_1075542_3232.html#l3ip4Ijy1H75IdOo.99

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